

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE I-5

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Support in passing Latin aid promised

By John Maclean
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WASHINGTON—Reagan administration supporters in the Senate vowed to continue the battle to win emergency assistance for El Salvador's military and for anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua, despite a defeat in a Republican-controlled committee Thursday.

The supporters said they would offer the administration's request for an extra \$93 million in military aid to El Salvador next week, after the Senate Appropriations Committee took no action on the request Thursday. At the same time, the committee narrowly defeated another amendment that would have provided an additional \$21 million in covert assistance to the CIA-backed rebels in Nicaragua.

The committee voted 15-14 after more than two hours of back-and-forth parliamentary maneuvering, during which several senators complained they were being stampeded into a quick vote.

"We're obviously disappointed" by the vote, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said Friday. "We regard it as a need for funding a vital part of the President's Central American policy. We will explore ways to achieve this funding."

The administration wanted action on both matters Thursday and sought to get it by attaching them to unrelated bills dealing with home heating costs and African drought relief.

BOTH MEASURES still are likely to be considered by the Senate and House. But the committee vote cut off a White House drive to win approval for the extra funds on a rush basis.

Top State Department officials, including Langhorne Motley, assistant secretary for inter-American affairs, hovered about the meeting room as the committee considered the matter.

Sen. Ted Stevens [R., Alaska] who introduced the amendment for \$21 million on behalf of the administration, offered senators a secret briefing by unidentified "persons" in a nearby room if they wanted to hear about the plight of the CIA-backed rebel contras in Nicaragua.

Earlier in the day, Reagan administration officials said they would press urgently for the extra \$93 million for El Salvador. They argued that the Salvadoran army has run so low on ammunition and supplies that it cannot guarantee security for presidential elections barely two weeks away.

BUT ALL THESE efforts and arguments brought no immediate success, even on the Republican-dominated committee.

Sen. Mark Hatfield [R., Ore.], the chairman, said the administration left no time for the committee to complete its "homework." He said a vote should have been put off until the senators had been more fully briefed by intelligence agencies and other officials.

Several other Republicans agreed, including Sen. Pete Domenici of New Mexico, who said the State Department had "handled this about as poorly as anything I have seen in my 11 years and 3 months [in Congress]."

Domenici indicated he would seriously consider supporting the administration's extra aid requests. But he said the issue was too important to be given "this kind of 12-to-16-hour deadline."

"If the State Department is going to handle the rest of this matter the way they have handled things so far, I guarantee they will fail," Domenici said.

THE VOTE CAME on an amendment by Stevens to a popular bill approving \$200 million for low-income families to pay fuel costs. That bill eventually was passed and sent to the Senate floor.

The fuel bill was considered the surest way to get favorable treatment for the aid request for Nicaraguan guerrillas, which still can be offered as an amendment on the Senate floor.

Sen. Robert Kasten [R., Wis.] planned to add the Salvadoran-aid request to a bill to send \$150 million in food to drought-stricken countries in Africa. When the committee put off that matter until next week, Kasten said he will try again then.

The administration decided on attaching the aid pleas to unrelated bills after exploring several other options and running into heavy congressional resistance. One option, to make an end-run of Congress and send El Salvador money from an emergency fund, still has not been ruled out, officials said.

But several congressmen have warned that such an action would be considered a major affront and would jeopardize congressional approval of the entire Central American aid request.

ADMINISTRATION officials Thursday stressed the urgency of the Central American aid requests. "We want the matter considered by Congress promptly," said Larry Speakes, White House spokesman. "We attach national importance to the situation in El Salvador."

And at the State Department, spokesman John Hughes said: "We had hoped [for] swift action to deal with the security needs in El Salvador. The need for this additional military assistance is now."